

INDIA

Local knowledge spices up tour

GEMMA NISBET meets a WA couple in the know

Travellers can gain a personal perspective on India with a special tour next year from Premium Journeys by Bicton Travel.

The 18-day Exotic India luxury tour will be hosted by Harpal and Manjeet Ahluwalia, a couple with a strong connection to both India and Perth. Indian-born Harpal travelled extensively throughout his homeland during his three decades in the Indian defence forces before he and Manjeet, a teacher, moved to WA nearly 20 years ago to join their son, who was studying here at the time.

The pair are keen travellers — so far this year they’ve rung in the new year in Kuala Lumpur and cruised from Amsterdam to Budapest, and will soon set sail on a voyage along the Yangtze — and are Bicton Travel clients. A discussion about tours in India prompted Bicton Travel owner Carole Smethurst to ask if they would consider accompanying a tour group.

The tour, which will operated by Insight Vacations, will run from October 22 next year and has been designed with

considerable input from Harpal. “If I were to take a good friend of mine to show them India for the first time . . . this is what I’d like to show them,” he explains.

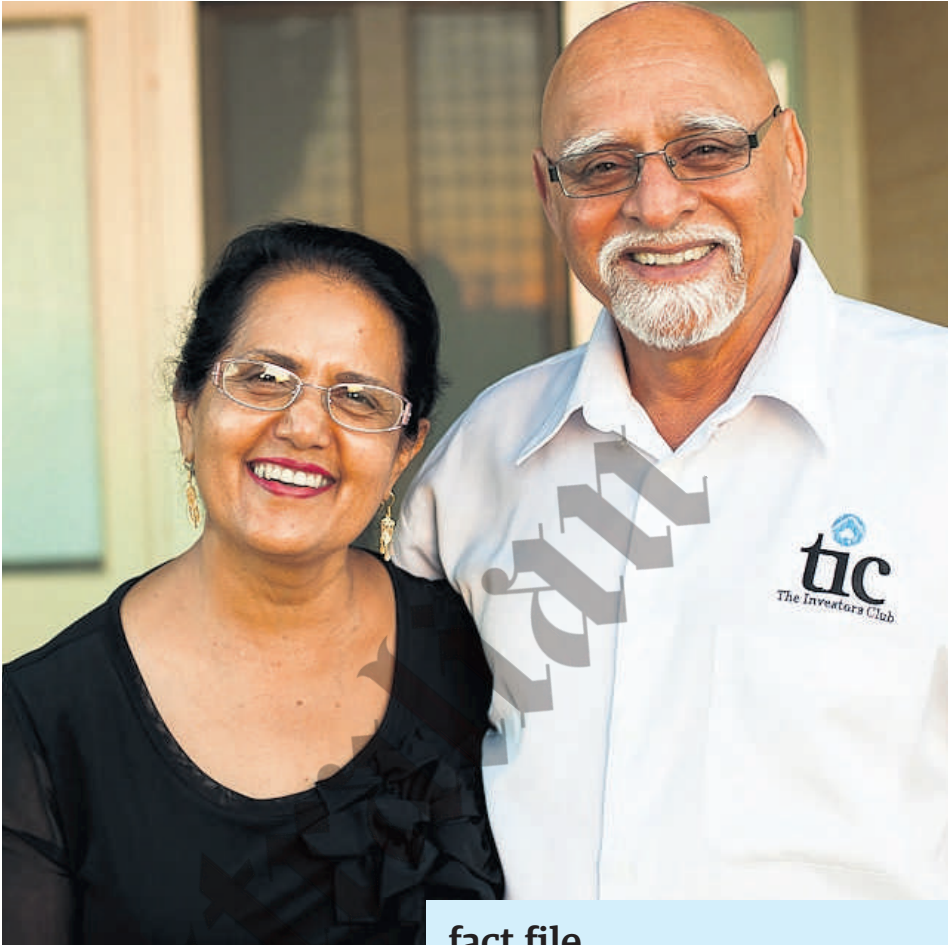
The itinerary focuses on Rajasthan and the

Golden Triangle. Guests will fly into New Delhi for a three-night stay before travelling (mostly by air-conditioned coach but with one train journey) to Agra, Ranthambore, Jaipur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Udaipur. There will be two-night stays in each destination before flying back to New Delhi for the journey home.

“This is a very ambitious kind of a tour and it takes you to interesting places,” Harpal says. While it includes big-name sites including Delhi’s Red Fort, the Taj Mahal and Jaipur’s Palace of the Winds, Harpal has drawn on his local knowledge to “extend it a bit more” by including less-visited attractions. “There are so many more interesting places which people don’t go to because they are not aware of them,” he says.

For example, in Harpal’s home town of Agra, most visitors visit the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort “and they’re done”. He’s included both, of course, but added in a few local gems. “For instance, there’s the tomb of Akbar, one of the Mughal emperors, which is worth seeing. Then there’s the tomb of Itmad-Ud-Daulah, it’s a beautiful structure — in fact, I find it prettier than the Taj Mahal; it is far more delicate and far superior, except the scale is much smaller.”

Other highlights will include a cooking demonstration in Ranakpur, a visit to the deserted ancient capital of Fatehpur Sikri, tiger-spotting in Ranthambore National Park and stays in numerous heritage hotels — “essentially palaces,”



Manjeet and Harpal Ahluwalia will host a hands-on tour of India for Bicton Travel in 2016.

Harpal says. “They’re not just a (normal) four or five-star hotel — you can go and stay in a four or five-star hotel but to stay in those ancient palaces is a different experience.”

A particularly special experience will be joining celebrations in Jaipur for Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, which sees locals lighting lanterns and candles, attending prayers and fireworks displays, feasting and exchanging gifts. As Harpal says: “You can go at any time of the year that is a good weather period but why not go during the festival of light, which is unique to India?”

Harpal says the quality of the trip is such that it will be “like being treated like a maharajah”. And while he and Manjeet will host the tour, the group will also be accompanied by a

fact file

■ The 18-day Exotic India with Diwali Festival of Lights escorted tour departs from Perth on October 22, 2016. It costs \$9595 per person twin share (\$12,870 single), including return economy flights from Perth to Delhi with Singapore Airlines, 17 nights of accommodation in first-class hotels, most meals, sightseeing and entrance fees, drinks during welcome and farewell dinners, portage and gratuities throughout, services of a tour director, transportation by air-conditioned coach and rail and a flight from Udaipur to New Delhi. 1800 689 842 or premium@bictontravel.com.au.

professional tour director, smoothing the journey through a destination that can seem daunting, particularly to first-time visitors.

And indeed, Harpal says that “for a first-timer who hasn’t been to India, this is a very good option as an introduction”. For his part, he’s “absolutely” looking forward to showing the group “not only my home town but also my perspective. It’s not a tourist’s perspective — it’s from a person who has been around there and seen it from a different viewpoint.”

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